



ADVANCING WELLNESS and RESILIENCE in EDUCATION

Information Brief

Substance Abuse Awareness and Prevention

RECOGNIZING SUBSTANCE ABUSE IN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS



Adolescents are often less likely to realize they need help or to seek treatment for substance abuse compared to adults.² This makes it especially important for parents, caregivers and school professionals to be able to recognize the signs and symptoms so they can refer students suffering from substance abuse disorders for help. Some of the signs and symptoms associated with substance abuse are listed in the box below. If you notice any of these signs, it is important that you refer the child/adolescent for treatment and support. Additionally, substance abuse should be treated as a mental illness.³ Substance abusers are individuals in need of support, treatment and understanding. It is not a character flaw or something they are able to control or manage on their own. Individuals who are using or abusing substances often have other underlying mental health problems. It is necessary to address these issues in addition to the actual substance use.³

Signs Your Child/Student May Be Abusing Drugs or Alcohol¹

Problems at school:

- Forgetting homework often
- Missing classes/being absent
- Drop in grades
- Not showing interest in school or school activities

Physical Signs:

- Lack of energy or motivation
- Red eyes or cheeks
- Difficulty focusing
- Strange burn on mouth or fingers
- Chronic nosebleeds

Behavioral Indicators:

- Excessive attempts at privacy (i.e., excessive alone time, not allowing family in their room)
- Not telling you where they are or who they are with
- Changes in family relationships
- Changes in friends
- Money issues (i.e., sudden requests for money without reason, stealing money or other items from home)

PREVENTING ADOLESCENT SUBSTANCE ABUSE

The main goal of prevention programs is to delay the age of onset for using drugs or alcohol. Research has shown that individuals who begin drinking before age 14 are much more likely to struggle with addiction later in life compared with those who do not begin drinking until after age 21, making this a risk factor for developing a substance abuse disorder. **Risk factors** are issues that make it more likely that an individual will experience a certain outcome (e.g., early age of onset for using drugs is a risk factor for substance abuse later in life). Other risk factors associated with substance abuse include difficulties in school, chaotic home environments and low-quality relationships. Conversely, **protective factors** make it less likely an individual will experience a given negative outcome (e.g., substance abuse). Keep in mind that risk and protective factors do not guarantee that an individual will or will not experience a given outcome; they simply make it more or less likely. By being aware of the risk factors and attempting to reduce them, as well as by increasing protective factors, we can help prevent or delay the use of drugs and alcohol among adolescents.



Risk and Protective Factors Associated with Adolescent Substance Abuse⁴

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| <p>Risk Factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chaotic home environment • Ineffective parenting • Little mutual attachment or nurturing • Inappropriate, shy, or aggressive classroom behavior • Academic failure • Low academic aspirations • Poor social coping skills • Affiliations with deviant peers • Perceived external approval of drug use (peer, family, community) • Parental substance abuse or mental illness | <p>Protective Factors:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong family bonds • Parental engagement in child's life • Clear parental expectations and consequences • Academic success • Strong bonds with pro-social institutions (school, community, church) • Conventional norms about drugs and alcohol |
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STRATEGIES FOR ADULTS

The following are some strategies to help parents (and other adults who work with youth) prevent drug and alcohol abuse among their children and adolescents:

- **Establish guidelines:** Set expectations and make this clear to your child. Let them know what is acceptable behavior and what is not. It may also be helpful to discuss different types of drugs and the dangers associated with them. This takes away the mystery associated with drug use and will hopefully prevent them from experimenting with drugs they do not know anything about.⁶
- **Monitor your teen(s):** Be aware of where your teen is, who they are with and what they are doing. You can do this by checking in with them through phone calls, randomly coming home earlier than expected, having neighbors watch for visitors to the house while you are gone and monitoring the levels of prescription drugs in your home. Also, watch for changes in your teen's habits or the people they are spending time with.⁶ It may also be helpful to monitor what they are watching on TV related to the use of drugs and alcohol.⁷
- **Make consequences of drug use clear:** Just as it is important to establish clear expectations, it is also important to make clear the consequences of not following these guidelines. For example, you can discuss the various consequences that may result from drug use, including legal penalties, health problems, academic issues, etc. Additionally, rather than focusing on punishments, you may also consider rewarding your teen for engaging in positive behaviors such as doing well in school and following household rules.⁶
- **Have an open dialogue:** It is essential for your teen to be able to trust you and communicate with you about these issues. This can be accomplished by being open and honest when talking with them about drug use.⁶
- **Be a good role model for your child:** Model positive behaviors, such as only drinking in moderation, never driving after drinking and avoiding the use of illegal drugs.⁷
- **Be involved in your child's life:** Listen to them, and don't judge. Encourage your child to call you if they are ever in a situation where they feel uncomfortable. Build a sense of trust and nonjudgment, and emphasize that they will not get in trouble for calling you for help.
- **Encourage your child to participate in extracurricular activities:** Being involved in extracurricular activities and community service makes it less likely a teen will become involved with drugs and alcohol. Encourage your child to participate in things like sports, clubs and community service.⁷
- **Encourage your child to work hard in school:** Teens who are doing well in school are less likely to use drugs and alcohol. Ask your child about school often, and be supportive. Help them to reach their goals and to get help when needed (i.e., from a tutor or counselor).⁷

EVIDENCE-BASED PROGRAMS TO PREVENT OR ADDRESS ADOLESCENT SUBSTANCE USE

The following list contains evidence-based programs you can use to delay or prevent the use of drugs or alcohol among adolescents. Find these programs on SAMHSA's National Registry of Evidence-based Programs and Practices (NREPP).⁵

- **Across Ages:** This is a mentoring program that matches adults with young adolescents (mainly those who are transitioning to middle school) to provide education about substance abuse, foster healthy attitudes toward drugs and alcohol, and increase the protective factors in the lives of these youth. <http://acrossages.org>
- **Hip-Hop 2 Prevent Substance Abuse and HIV (H2P):** This is a program aimed at reducing early substance use and sexual activity among 12 to 16 year olds, as well as improving their family interactions and encouraging healthy recreational activities among youths. <http://www.hiphop2prevent.org>
- **Parenting with Love and Limits (PLL):** The purpose of this program is to support families of 10-18 year olds who have emotional and behavioral issues (including substance abuse). This program teaches parents how to establish healthy communication patterns and relationships and restore family attachments. www.gopll.com
- **Project ALERT:** This is a school-based prevention program that aims to prevent middle school students from experimenting with alcohol or drugs. The curriculum adopts of social influence model of prevention and the goal is to educate students on ways to resist pro-drug pressures and influences. Program contact: Phyllis Ellickson, Phyllis_ellickson@rand.org
- **Students Leading Students:** This is a school-based substance abuse prevention program that is peer-led. Students Leading Students involves high school students, with staff support, influencing their peers to encourage them to make healthy choices. www.SLStoday.org
- **Early Risers "Skills for Success" Prevention Program:** This is a family-focused program that aims to reduce the development of conduct issues such as substance abuse among youth. It is meant for youth ages 6 to 12, and each family works with a family advocate to target risk and protective factors in the youth's life. Program contacts: Sarah M. Coleman (colem050@umn.edu) and Gerald J. August (augus001@umn.edu)
- **Strengthening Families Program for Parents and Youth 10-14:** This is a program that focuses on positive family relationships in order to reduce substance use and aggression among youth ages 10 to 14. It includes separate sessions providing education to parents and to children, and then joint sessions for family activity time. <http://www.extension.iastate.edu/sfp>
- **Project Towards No Drug Abuse:** This program works with high school youth to improve their self-control, communication skills, decision making and motivation to resist drugs. Teachers or health educators lead it. <http://tnd.usc.edu>

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